

# Goliarda Sapienza's Eccentric Interruptions: Multiple selves, gender ambiguities and disrupted desires

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Charlotte Ross

**Goliarda Sapienza's Eccentric Interruptions:  
Multiple selves, gender ambiguities and disrupted desires**

*Abstract*

This article considers the work of Goliarda Sapienza (1924-1996), which is currently undergoing a renaissance: early texts are being republished, posthumous works have appeared in print, and she is beginning to attract sustained critical attention for the first time. With reference to several texts, most notably *Lettera aperta*, *Io Jean Gabin*, *Il filo di mezzogiorno*, *L'arte della gioia* and *Le certezze del dubbio*, I show how her work challenges a series of received norms and concepts: in addition to deconstructing any notion of the coherent, unified subject, she also disrupts traditional (hetero)normative conceptions of gender identity, sexed body and sexual desire. I analyse her work and thought as a series of interrupted autobiographical chapters, and argue that she can be read as an «eccentric subject», as defined by Teresa de Lauretis: she is «dis-located» from normative society, and challenges and interrupts dominant discourses, but also calls into question alternative discourses, for example feminism. As a result, her work may be challenging to read, but it is richly provocative. Finally, I consider how Sapienza herself experiences modalities of «interruption»; she strives to rewrite herself following trauma, and struggles with same-sex desire. Her eccentricity is experienced as both a driving, productive force of which she is proud, and a source of personal contestation. I conclude that while her relationship with some strands of feminism is rather combative, her unorthodox self-questioning, and her questioning of all institutions, make her work and thought immensely important as a form of feminist self-(re-)definition that has hitherto received little attention.

*Introduction*

The reception of Goliarda Sapienza's work has been uneven to say the least. Her first novel *Lettera aperta* (1967) elicited praise from some important figures in the literary world and was shortlisted for the Premio Strega,<sup>1</sup> yet her most sustained work, *L'arte della gioia*, written between 1967-76, remained unpublished until after her death in 1996. It only appeared in 1998, despite Sapienza's numerous attempts to get her novel in print.<sup>2</sup> For some it is too experimental, for others not experimental enough (SCARPA 2009, 531-32); it seems to be a novel that does not fit the moment of its composition. However, its translation into French in 2005 has led to a (re)discovery of not only this novel, but of all Sapienza's work, including previously unpublished manuscripts: *Lettera aperta* has been reissued by Sellerio; *Il filo di mezzogiorno*, published by Aldo Garzanti in 1969, was republished by La Tartaruga in 2003; *L'università di Rebibbia*, first

published by Rizzoli in 1983, was reissued in 2006; *Le certezze del dubbio*, originally published by Pellicano Libri in 1987, is now published by Rizzoli (2007); *L'arte della gioia* was republished by Einaudi in 2008, and two previously unpublished texts, *Io, Jean Gabin* and *Destino coatto*, a collection of short stories, some of which appeared in *Nuovi argomenti* in 1970, were published by Einaudi in 2010 and 2011 respectively.<sup>3</sup> Sapienza's former partner, Angelo Pellegrino, with whom she spent the last two decades of her life, has been active writing «prefazioni» and «postfazioni» to these volumes, and more are in preparation.<sup>4</sup> Giovanna Providenti published the first biography of Sapienza in 2010, and there are now two collections of critical essays on her work (Farnetti 2011, Providenti 2012).

This flurry of printing and critical reception, echoed by internet forums of reader fans, and even facebook groups,<sup>5</sup> testifies to a writer of substance, who somehow slipped between the folds of her own time. Her last partner, Angelo Pellegrino, asserts that this was certainly not due to lack of contacts, since she was exceptionally well-connected in artistic circles. His interpretation is that others were jealous of her success with *Lettera aperta*, and they found her focus on the self to be «piccolo-borghese» (PELLEGRINO 2011, 81). Another reason for the lack of critical attention during her lifetime may be that her writing is, on some level, quite uncomfortable to read: Modesta, the heroine of *L'arte della gioia*, is seen by some critics as partly autobiographical,<sup>6</sup> and might be characterised as a feminist icon, but is also a murderer;<sup>7</sup> Sapienza's accounts of her analysis and of her experiences in prison are disarmingly frank and raw. Of course, in another optic, the discomfort which may be produced by her writing is precisely its strength. Her behaviour and that of her female protagonists challenge the boundaries of acceptable ethical conduct. Similarly, her texts, like many autobiographical writings by women, seek not to install a sovereign subject, but to push to the margins of the rational subject, to the margins of what has historically been recognised as «autobiography» (GILMORE 2001, 21). This makes her work both challenging, as it contests the (reassuring but problematic) notion of the coherent self, and valuable, as it opens up alternative, richly nuanced and productively complex spaces for self-representation that is also self-questioning.

In this article, I explore some of the challenging aspects of Sapienza's texts. First, I discuss the unreliability of her narratorial voice, which is deliberately, consciously and compellingly called into question by her tendency to highlight what Leigh Gilmore calls «self-representation's ambiguities» (GILMORE 2001, 23). Sapienza plays with the narrative voice; she questions the reliability of her own memories; she admits to providing the reader with false and misleading information; she privileges fiction above «real» life, but blurs the boundary between these realms. Second, I discuss her narrativizations of gendered and sexed identity, and of sexual desire, and show how, taking the lead from the models of gender advocated to her as a child, she challenges socio-cultural norms of sex and gender, presenting a queer series of identifications and desires that disrupt traditional orthodoxies.<sup>8</sup> Sapienza insists on the learned, socio-culturally constructed character of gender, and attacks traditional norms of and moralistic positions on sexuality, making her texts «an intervention in, even an interruption of, a whole meaning making apparatus» (GILMORE 2001, 23). Amongst other vital issues that they interrogate—such as social and material inequalities, Fascist oppression, censorship, definitions of mental instability, intellectual autonomy, civil disobedience—Sapienza's texts can be seen to «interrupt» the normative gendered and sexed «meaning making apparatus». She oscillates between espousing an ambiguous gender identity, a form of female masculinity, and seeming to support discourses of sexual difference feminism. However, her desires are also «interrupted» in turn, by prohibitions on same-sex desire.

If, as I suggest, Sapienza's writings can be seen as «interruptions», then her self-representations depict a «soggetto eccentrico», in the sense defined by Teresa de Lauretis: a subject who, through personal, political and textual practices, challenges and «dis-locates» herself from normative socio-cultural discourses and models of identity (DE LAURETIS 1999, 48.49, 56-57). Moreover, Sapienza can also be seen to dis-locate herself from alternative positions to mainstream discourses with which one might assume she would feel some affinity, such as contemporary feminism. This doubly dislocating eccentricity evidently also extends to the protagonist of *L'arte della gioia*, Modesta. Of course, de Lauretis argues that this dual interruption, of both normative and «oppositional» feminist discourses, is a vital function of the eccentric subject, since it

allows the various strands of feminist thought to grow, develop and remain critically productive (DE LAURETIS 1999, 48). As I show, her work is richly provocative. However, Sapienza is also deeply dis-located from herself, often painfully so. This is particularly the case in relation to her expressions of desire for women. As de Lauretis suggests, her desire renders her «eccentric» in a manner that may lead to a productive «riscrittura di sè», but she also feels «fuori del sistema concettuale», and experiences internal struggle (DE LAURETIS 1999, 55-56).

### *1. Learning to play herself: remembering identity*

Sapienza's self, a multiply-interrupted self, is arguably the major focus of her writing. In *Lettera aperta*, written between 1963-67, when Sapienza was aged 39-43, she recounts her childhood spent in the San Berillo district of Catania, known as «la Civita». The various voices that we hear in the text—Goliarda, known as Iuzza, as a child, teenager and forty-year old woman—are not seamlessly knitted together but are presented as fragments of a multiple persona, undermining any conception of a coherent self. Her recollections continue in *Io Jean Gabin*, begun in 1979 but only published after her death, which describes her sustained identification with the French film actor Jean Gabin, adding further dimensions to her complex self-portrait. Sapienza moved to Rome in 1941, to take up a scholarship at the Accademia d'Arte Drammatica, and was active and successful in the theatre and in cinema for several years.<sup>9</sup> However in 1962, she took a large dose of sleeping pills. This act was seen by others, and is acknowledged in *Lettera aperta* by Sapienza, as attempted suicide (LA 15), although an oblique reference in a passage published in the collection *Destino coatto* which could be read as an allusion to this act, describes the misperceptions of those surrounding a «suicidal» subject: «Io, veramente, volevo solo dormire e invece sono morta. Non lo hanno capito» (DC 29). Sapienza was confined to a psychiatric clinic where she underwent electroshock treatment, and subsequently began psychoanalysis with Dr Ignazio Majore, which continued until 1967. She attempted suicide for the second time in 1964. *Il filo di mezzogiorno* (1969) recounts her analysis with Majore, including the journey to retrieve lost memories and overcome her fears of abandonment, her profound

transference and the charged sexual character of their relationship, which may have led to Majore abandoning the profession (PROVIDENTI 2010, 151-58). The next published chapter of her life is *L'università di Rebibbia*, which describes her experiences in Rebibbia prison where she was incarcerated for 5 days in 1980, for stealing a piece of jewellery from a friend when she was financially desperate.<sup>10</sup> *Le certezze del dubbio*, the final chapter of her multi-textual autobiography in chronological terms, covers the period after her release from prison and her sexually-charged friendship with her former cell-mate Roberta, who becomes involved in violent activism. Alongside these explicit, if partially fictionalised, autobiographies, stands *L'arte della gioia*. This novel tells the story of Modesta, born in Sicily in 1900, who progresses from barefoot illiterate urchin to heiress to the fortunes of the aristocratic Brandiforte family, through lying, killing, self-improvement, seduction and sheer determination. She has relationships with women and men, is birth/adopted mother to many children but refuses to be bound in marriage to anyone. The novel offers an alternative chronicle of the twentieth century, leaving Modesta in the 1960s as she embarks on a new relationship. *L'arte della gioia* weaves biographical details together with fictionalizations, enabling Sapienza to construct an alternative, embellished biography for herself that recasts several significant relationships in provocative ways; for instance, Sapienza's mother, Maria Giudice, appears in the novel as a contemporary of the protagonist Modesta; Carlo Civardi, with whom Maria Giudice had seven children before moving down to Sicily where she met Goliarda's father, Peppino Sapienza, appears in the novel as a communist doctor from Turin, and has a relationship with Modesta (PROVIDENTI 2010, 33).

This brief summary of Sapienza's writings highlights the sustained, self-exploratory focus of her work. Yet this lasting need to write about her life does not produce an exhaustive picture. Although she is at times quite candid, as discussed below in relation to sex and sexual desire, she does not explicitly recount the events that led to the «suicide» attempt in 1962; nor does she explain in these publications why she was imprisoned in Rebibbia. Therefore, the different texts, as chapters of a cumulative autobiography, do not dovetail neatly into one another but pull in different directions and tease us with the missing information that prevents us from fully understanding the situations she describes. These interruptions, which prevent the narration of a coherent self, are com-

pounded by Sapienza's manipulations of the narrative voice. In several of the more overtly autobiographical texts, as well as in *L'arte della gioia*, Sapienza oscillates between first and third person narrator.<sup>11</sup> By staging these discontinuities and deploying multiple perspectives Sapienza evokes the different connected and disconnected layers and perspectives that constitute the self, and through which it is constituted.

A self-conscious, deconstructive perspective on the «self» is evident from Sapienza's first publication, *Lettera aperta*. Oscillating between childish naivety and the voice of experience, the text narrates the process of retrieving her repressed, forgotten and confused memories, as she pulls out objects, such as her mother's shawl, from an old wooden chest in her room. Sapienza's autobiographical narrative explicitly flags up its ambiguous status, as she claims to represent lived experience but openly acknowledges to the reader the «non-verità» of her words. She explains that she is attempting to order the memories which come tumbling out with the objects before her, but, given that she, like us all, has been exposed to more lies than truths, rather than revealing the «verità» of her life and self, this process can only generate «una bella sfilza di bugie».<sup>12</sup> While on one level this clever, self-conscious remark alerts the reader to a post-structuralist distrust of metanarrative and a postmodern sensibility, Sapienza's stated motivation for writing the text is deeply personal and stems from profound personal trauma. She is writing to avoid attempting suicide for the third time, by talking through her problems with her readers: «sono stata due volte per morire “di mia propria mano” [...] ho pensato che sfogarsi con qualcuno sarebbe stato meglio» (LA 15).

In this disarmingly lighthearted confession of continuing suicidal impulses, Sapienza forges links between existence and textual articulation, underscoring the fundamental importance of writing, communication and of being heard if she is to achieve a liveable life. She also involves the author in an uncomfortable complicity, partially responsabilizing her or him for her own survival. Given that the ambiguous autobiography *Lettera aperta* was written as Sapienza was undergoing psychoanalysis, it is not surprising that she makes allusions to the relationship between analyst and analysand, or to processes of retrieving repressed memories. What is striking is the lucidity with which she evokes and negates the constructions of the reassuring coherent narrative of self that has

been seen as one objective of the psychoanalytic process. Instead, she seems to take for granted that, as Judith Butler suggests, «the narrative reconstruction of a life» is not possible, because «life is constituted through a fundamental interruption» (BUTLER 2005, 52). If for Butler, that interruption is the presence of the other, for Sapienza, it could be seen as the presence of both the other and other self(ves). The narrative that she shares with us, redolent with allusions to the disclosures of the analysand, is a multiple textual life; a series of fictions which oscillate between revelation and obfuscation but which certainly do not strive to be consistent, except in ways that undermine the authenticity of consistency. Some of the more overt ambiguities in the unpublished manuscript (a sort of textual unconscious) are edited out of the published text, but are worthy of note. For example, in the unpublished manuscript she asserts on the first page that she is 50 as she writes, but then reveals that she has lied about this because:

non potei fare a meno di nascondermi ancora dietro una finzione anche se minima fare finta di essere già quasi vecchia [sic]. Fingere di essere vecchi dà un'illusione di sicurezza, di essere un altro, quell'altro «noi» sconosciuto a noi stessi.<sup>13</sup>

Sapienza evokes the necessity of the reassuring, fictive self, the narrated self of a «successful» analysis, but simultaneously reveals how, uncannily, it both is and is not the self; it is inevitably multiple and constructed, an unreal illusion of an imagined, future self. Sapienza dis-locates herself from the (contested) moment of composition, ranging both back and forward in time. She recounts several layers of temporal, existential, ontological and epistemological interruption. She also complicates the relationship between a (constructed) self that is consolidated through retrieving her past, and a self that is constituted through articulating textually and performing a series of unreliable memories. As Giuliana Ortu has noted, Sapienza recounts her childhood like a theatrical role to be learned and performed (ORTU 2011). Towards the end of *Lettera aperta*, Sapienza comments:

Oggi, 10 maggio 1965 compio 41 anni ed ho quasi finito questo mio libro che se riuscirò ad impararlo a memoria—io non so improvvisare: ho fatto l'attrice e devo, per parlare, avere un copione—sarà il mio parlare a voi. (LA 146)



This statement, which interrupts itself, throws the reader into a hall of mirrors, calling into question both the reflected and the reflection. Identity is posited as radically performative, without basis, since even memories are asserted to be fictions that are learnt and performed rather than retrieved scraps of «true» lived experience. Similarly, in the later text *Le certezze del dubbio*, Sapienza comments that her sense of self relies on textualization in order to assume any substance: «Per me quella che chiamiamo vita, prende consistenza solo se riesco a tradurla in scrittura» (CD, 139). Here Sapienza is dis-located from her embodied self, requiring confirmation achieved through the written expression of her experiences to feel reassured about the solidity of her life. The disjuncture between these selves, and their reliance on each other, further complicates the «meaning making machine» of hegemonic discourses of coherent identity.

If *Lettera aperta* begins with a plea for the reader to listen, to save Sapienza from suicidal thoughts through their attention, and to allow her to offload her memories through textual articulation, as the book progresses it seems that rather than allowing her to liberate herself from her painful past, Sapienza needs the reader as spectator to her learned performance of herself in the present moment, as constituted by a manipulated, remembered version of her past. Her interrupted, discontinuous but ongoing self-narration, coupled with her conviction that lived experience relies on its confirmation through the realm of textual articulation, necessarily involves multiple perspectives, which profoundly question traditional notions of the unified subject.

## 2. *Ambiguous genders and sexual differences*

If for Sapienza identity is experienced like a part to be learned, then this is equally true of constitutive elements of identity such as gender, sexed identity and sexual desire. For Sapienza, following arguments made by Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* (1949), which were developed later by Judith Butler in her influential *Gender Trouble* (1999), being a sexed and gendered, embodied self is a condition that we perform as a result of discursive socio-cultural inculcation, rather than a series of biologically-determined pathways. Like the role of her remembered self that she was attempting to learn in *Lettera aperta*, Sapienza characterises sexual and gender identities as «mestieri» that are learned

(SAPIENZA unpublished, 115). In this section I show the self-conscious attitude to gender performance, sexed embodiment and sexual desire that Sapienza assumes across her work, and explore the dis-locations from herself, from normative society, and from some feminist discourses, that she articulates and experiences.

In *Lettera aperta*, Sapienza is subject to, struggles against, and rejects dominant norms of gender and sexuality: she recalls how she rejected the inevitable destiny of «donna imbecille», set out for her by her private tutor Professore Jsaya (*LA*, 22); she takes to heart her mother's criticism of «donnette» who simply sit around waiting for a husband, and strives to fulfil her declaration «Tu Goliarda, non sei una donnetta» (*LA*, 110); she refuses to accept that as a «femmina» she was not able to be a «brigante» (*LA*, 44), instead assuming a swagger, a combative spirit and sense of honour worthy of the characters played by Jean Gabin. When undecided as to how to act, she reflects on what Gabin would have done; for example, on the verge of threatening a woman with physical force in order to gain money, she reconsiders and opts for a more honourable strategy: «E io che, anche se nata femmina, ho spalle larghe, braccia lunghe e nodose e passo rapido [...] decido di trovare un modo più consono a me e a Gabin» (*IJG*, 17).

The multiple challenges to norms of gender and sexed embodiment in *Lettera aperta* and *Io Jean Gabin* place Sapienza in a decidedly dis-located position. She distances herself from the category of women, through disrespectful, frankly misogynistic remarks («Le donne! Chi ci capiva niente con le donne»: *IJG*, 17), and emphasizes the «masculinity» of her body—although it must be remembered that she is only a child, and her swagger must have appeared comical rather than threatening. Her romantic fantasy of herself as a «giovane perseguitato e solo» and compulsive viewing and memorizing of Gabin's roles as criminal and rebellious social-outcasts (*IJG*, 7-8), lead her to perform a brand of female masculinity that oscillates between fantasies of violent bravado and «gentlemanly» behaviour, as shown in the citation above. Encouraged by her mother's confirmation of her difference from the «donnette», Sapienza happily adopts the role of a «maschiaccio», finding this funny rather than offensive, and deliberately undertaking «masculine» activities such as training her body to be strong through boxing with her brother Carlo (*IJG*, 33-37).

Here masculinity is seen as a powerful and liberating identity that she can assume independently of her sex, and redefine, thereby reshaping her body in her desired image. Ultimately, Sapienza's is a masculinity without maleness that denaturalises and reveals masculinity as a construction, challenging the assumption that biological sex inevitably leads to a predestined gender identity (HALBERSTAM 1998). Gendered behaviour and biology are linked, but queerly, since Goliarda seems convinced that by performing her gender differently, through following an alternative behavioural pathway she will be able to alter her physical, sexed body in some way: indeed, she even believes that if she acts in a more «masculine» way, conversing with men like her mother does rather than waiting silently, she will be differently embodied, even able to avoid the onset of menstruation that has turned her half-sister Nica from playful and energetic to «seria e magra» (*LA*, 110). In this conviction her perspective resonates with Foucault's view (then developed by Butler) that even biological sex itself is not a causal principle but is constructed through regimes of power.<sup>14</sup> Her performance of gender is highly self-conscious, especially when channelled through her idolization of Gabin's cinematographic masculinity. As Butler argues, her gender is constituted within normative discursive regimes of sex and gender, but by refusing to play the part assigned to other girls, by emphasizing her eccentricity in often theatrical ways, she creates «the occasion for the critical reworking of apparently constitutive gender norms» (BUTLER 1993, x).

One reason for Sapienza's dis-location from other girls/women and from binary models of gender is the spectre of her older half-brother, Goliardo, the son of Peppino Sapienza and Lucia Musumeci, who drowned in suspicious circumstances in 1921, three years before she was born.<sup>15</sup> She was named after her brother, and his image follows her as she is often mistaken for him by her father and others,<sup>16</sup> interpellated as both male and female, as though the ghost of Goliardo can be seen shining through her. She is, to some extent, constructed as a continuation of his interrupted life. Perhaps understandably, Sapienza is drawn to images and people who exhibit any kind of gendered or sexed ambiguity: she is fascinated by images in a medical textbook that she reads as «immagini di donna-uomo, di uomo-donna» (*LA*, 63). More concretely, Maria Giudice herself can be seen as embodying this gendered and sexed duality; she is held up as an aspirational model thanks to her unusual powers of articulation that allow her

to transcend the constraints of her sex: Professor Jsaya remarks to Sapienza «Vedo che cominci ad esprimerti come un uomo, e non come un animaletto femmina. Sei come tua madre» (*LA*, 63).

The model to which Sapienza is encouraged to cleave is therefore profoundly ambiguous; a dual figure that on the one hand reinforces traditional binaries of gender and sex as a norm, from which she is told she deviates, whilst on the other hand, it opens up a queer pathway that disrupts such discursive polarizations. It is therefore perhaps not surprising that she feels entitled to express sexual desire for both men and women and to adopt a highly unorthodox view of sexual morality. In her identifications with Gabin she finds a way to express desire for her mother: «la donna che avrei potuto amare! [...] la donna che Jean non avrebbe potuto non amare se l'avesse incontrata».<sup>17</sup> Yet this is far from a straightforward identification with a male-viewpoint in order to articulate desire for a woman in a heteronormative context, since Sapienza also posits her desire for her mother as a craving for an ideal «male» partner: «io non volevo un marito, ma un compagno, come lei» (*LA*, 110). In her own early sexual experiences, Sapienza again finds herself engaging in queer-sex and gender identification as she plays at «matrimonio» with Nicla (who she later discovers is her half-sister), which involves undressing, kissing and caressing each other, with one of them playing the «donna» (supine) and the other playing «l'uomo» (on top). Sapienza is less experienced than Nicla and is apparently content to let Nicla play the «man» for the pleasure it gives her (*LA*, 96). More generally, she expresses controversial views on sexual mores: she dethrones the dominant fiction of heterosexual, monogamous love and makes space to argue for the legitimacy of taboo forms of sexual relation, such as between a father and his daughter. She suggests that this is potentially no more or less harmful than any other sexual relationships, since «l'attrazione carnale e della fantasia non sopporta limiti e non ne nascono mostri né sventurate se non come in tutti gli accoppiamenti». While recognizing the profound difficulties raised by the question of incest, she reminds us that heterosexual marriage is often a breeding ground for «mostri, dolori, sventure umilianti» (*LA*, 132).

Sapienza's evolving relationship with her unorthodox childhood models of gender and sexual identity is compelling. We see continued praise of the «uomo-donna» figure, who is evoked as a feminist-re-embodiment of masculin-

ity. In *L'arte della gioia*, the austere Principessa Gaia Brandiforte compliments Modesta, insisting that, like the Principessa, she too is «nata per essere uomo» (AG, 89), echoing Professore Jsaya's praise of Maria Giudice and Sapienza's powers of self-expression. Later on, Modesta describes herself to Carmine, a steward with who she has an affair, as «mezzo caruso e mezzo maredda», proud of her «masculine» self-knowledge and of her rebellious, strong identity which will ensure a successful future (AG, 201). Echoing and enlarging on views expressed in *Lettera aperta*, Modesta argues that gender roles are learnt not innate, imposed not inevitable, and criticises the ways in which men are taught to close themselves in a «corazza di doveri e false certezze» and women are required to hide within «una corazza di seta» (AG, 343). Modesta carves out a position for herself in which she can enjoy her own form of «masculinity»; she runs the household, manages staff and finances, and insists on a sexual freedom that involves eyeing beautiful women as well as men; she tells her slightly disconcerted son Prando, after they have noticed the same attractive woman, «sono un po' uomo anch'io» (AG, 373).

In «real» life, however, she is rather more ambivalent about ambiguously gendered figures; for example, when she meets Citto Maselli's sister Tina,<sup>18</sup> she falls under her spell, despite, not because of, Tina's blend of masculinity and femininity:

Fu la prima donna che ho conosciuto [...] Sì, si identificava con l'essere mascolina, in tailleur, coi tacchi bassi, senza trucco, insomma il solito errore che imperversava a quell'epoca, eredità delle femminista del primo Novecento. Ma vedendo lei ebbi la rivelazione di come una donna può essere intelligente, impegnata e nello stesso tempo femminile. (FM, 101)

Sapienza is so taken that, she declares, that «comincio a copiarla» (FM, 101). I find these remarks particularly striking because, aside from the allusion to her self-conscious construction of gender identity based on imitating the performances of others, we see Sapienza both admiring a «masculine» woman, and criticizing a form of female emancipation that seems to rely on copying men. This is surprising, given her own emulation of Jean Gabin. Significantly, Sapienza had already expressed stronger criticism of women who seek validation through posing, more or less overly, as «men», in the unpublished manuscript of *Lettera aperta*. In a passage that was removed from the published text she describes how she initially sought to legitimise her words by assuming a male

pseudonym, but then the work of Simone de Beauvoir helped her to gain the confidence to speak for herself:

Quando cominciai a scrivere, lavorai a un romanzo—ottocento pagine!—cercando di nascondermi dietro un nome maschile. poi [sic] mi accorsi che erano cose mie che non avendo il coraggio di dire, appioppavo a quel povero protagonista. Insomma la solita donna che per avere il coraggio di parlare si traveste di panni maschili. Lo capii leggendo *Il secondo sesso* della De Beauvoir e se c'è fra voi qualche ragazza che porta la cravatta o gli sta spuntando la barba le consiglio di tralasciare quel discorso e di leggersi quel libro prezioso.<sup>19</sup>

These impassioned remarks raise several issues. Most importantly, Sapienza exhorts women to resist the gendered ways in which women have historically been excluded from intellectual debate and cultural contributions, through aspersions cast on their abilities. She admits her own insecurities, and her desire to hide the perceived handicap of her sex and gender, but then takes courage from de Beauvoir's arguments to speak with her own voice. While this may seem to imply a «true», essential, inner, female self, hidden behind the gendered social roles that we all assume, I would argue that Sapienza is seeking to valorize women's experience without imposing a false coherence—a position that chimes with sexual difference feminism, as expressed by de Beauvoir and developed by Italian feminists (LAZZARO WEISS 2002, 37).

Secondly, Sapienza's critique of a certain kind of female masculinity clearly throws her own identification with Gabin and the masculinity assumed by Modesta into a new light. While in her narrativizations of her childhood, particularly in *Io Jean Gabin*, she seems proud of her «masculinity», the statement cited above implies a more nuanced understanding of the kinds of patriarchal, gendered discourses that might have led her to disdain the «donnette» and aspire to emulate male models. Her words of advice to young girls to be proud of their status as women and not to seek validation through aping men are repeated in *L'arte della gioia*, as Modesta upbraids her lover Joyce: «Tu vuoi essere come un uomo, li imiti [...] e questo ti fa sentire un essere mutilo. Questo mi fa pena [...] Joyce, tu sei intera e sei donna» (AG, 349).

While on one reading Sapienza seems to have evolved from a fascination with and an appreciation of gender and sex hybridity, to a feminist consciousness of the importance of valorizing women's voices as women's voices, not as successful imitations of men, statements she makes elsewhere reveal different, discon-

sonant views. In her analysis with Majore, she rejects outright his interpretation of her masculine-inflected identity that she has been «costretta [dagli altri] ad agire come un uomo», not on the grounds of any undermining of her self-determination, but because she considers his binary model of sex and gender to be bourgeois conformism, suggesting that the differences between men and women are less marked than he believes: «Non mi pare che ci sia tutta questa differenza che lei mi dice fra uomo e donna, si tratta di individui ed individui» (*FM*, 69-70, 86). Sapienza's position on gender relations is further complicated when we consider a letter she wrote to Adele Cambria in 1979, ten years after the publications of *Il filo di mezzogiorno*, in response to Cambria's defence of the manuscript of *L'arte della gioia* which had been rejected by several publishers. Sapienza states:

proprio per lottare questo odio-malattia infantile del femminismo (nato tardi, purtroppo, e da quello Americano invece che dalla matrice vera e ricca delle femminilissime voci della Kollontay, della Woolf e di mia madre stessa) presi a scrivere delle avventure di Modesta dieci anni fa a costo di mettermi contro di loro. Le donne—come tu sai—sono il mio pianeta e la mia ricerca, il mio unico «partito», e forse, oltre all'amicizia, il mio unico scopo della vita [...] È stato duro per me [...] assistere all'insano neofitismo che come un veleno (sicuramente istillato dal potere: dividere l'uomo dalla donna per sconfiggerli entrambi [...]) mi costringeva a contrastarle dentro e fuori di me.  
Sempre lotterò per l'amicizia fra l'uomo e la donna, pianeti così diversi e così simili, bisognosi l'uno della diversità dell'altro.<sup>20</sup>

This letter shows, I believe, how torn Sapienza felt about contemporary discourses of feminism. While the brevity of her comments means it is hard to grasp the accusations she makes, we might surmise that the «veleno» she identifies is separatism, a strong current in 1970s feminism in Italy, including amongst Rome-based groups, where Sapienza was living.<sup>21</sup> In her view, it seems that separatism weakens both women and men by emphasizing the differences between them. She declares that she has taken a stand against such feminists, which has had an impact on her social life but also on her inner life; it has rendered her eccentric from a community that might have given her succour. It is rather confusing that she refers to her mother as one of the «femminilissime voci» of the past, especially given Maria Giudice's status as a «donna-uomo» in *Lettera aperta*. Her views here on the superlative «womanliness» of her mother and other earlier activists also seem to be in direct contrast with her statement

cited above regarding the «mistaken» habit of early twentieth-century feminists of assuming a masculine aesthetic. Moreover, she at once erects the category of women as the community to which she belongs, and unravels any monolithic understanding of this category by emphasizing the similarities as well as the differences between men and women, pointing back to a desire to treat people as individuals, expressed above.

What is clear is that while Sapienza espoused decidedly feminist views, she was not allied to the feminist movement in any straightforward way. Monica Farnetti's analysis of Modesta, and Sapienza, as exhibiting a kind of « "misoginia" amorosa» is useful here: this is a sentiment experienced by women who, while holding their sex in great esteem, feel a disdain for other women who, in their view, taint the image of woman in some way.<sup>22</sup> This feeling stems from an unwillingness to be associated with those women who are considered abject—indeed, Farnetti refers to Julia Kristeva's work as her discussion unfolds. Modesta can be seen to despise «inferior» women and indeed rids herself of women whom she despises; similarly (although certainly less drastically), Sapienza cuts herself off from women who do not espouse her views on feminist politics. Here it is evident how Sapienza's writing and politics can cause discomfort, since she seems to judge and blame other women, rather than considering the conditions that might have resulted in their having a different view or situation to her ideal of womanhood. In creating Modesta, Sapienza certainly did not strive to forge an easy feminist role model, as acknowledged in the citation above. However, I would argue that Modesta is an excellent vehicle for dramatizing Sapienza's frustrations, anxieties and passions relating to feminism, gender identity and sexual desire; she allows Sapienza to express a (self-)contradictory, eccentric perspective, that calls into question both dominant norms of sex, gender and sexuality, and some influential feminist perspectives, deconstructing any stereotypical notions of women as inevitably caring and nurturing, and insisting on the primacy of her own sexual desires and ambitions.

Initially, Modesta follows the route of obtaining power and influence by becoming a «donna-uomo»; she then continues to enjoy her «masculinity» throughout the novel, gaining evident pleasure from scandalizing her rather prudish son Prando. However, she is able to distinguish between different forms of «masculine» behaviour, noting how although once it made her proud to be



told she should have been born a man, understood as euphemistic praise for her competence, she was afraid of becoming patriarchal (AG, 131). Modesta also voices convincing feminist arguments about the value of women's contribution to society, and identifies strongly as a woman, berating Joyce for impersonating men because she felt ashamed of herself, and declaring herself proudly to be «donna» (AG, 409). In terms of sexual desire, she has relationships with women (Beatrice, Joyce, Nina) and with men (Carmine, Carlo, Mattia, Marco). She expresses both rather homophobic views, dismissing her relationship with Beatrice as mere «carezze di femmine» once she has slept with Carmine and experienced «real» sexual intimacy with a man (AG, 110-11), but also declaring the «normality» of her bisexual identity to Joyce: «sono donna, Joyce, e per me la normalità è amare l'uomo e la donna» (AG, 409).

Like the multiple selves expressed in *Lettera aperta*, these roles that Modesta plays, and the contradictions and disjunctures in Sapienza's remarks, do indeed interrupt any normative «meaning making machine», in that they challenge understandings of gender, sexuality and identity over and over again, and refuse to settle into any pattern, refusing to align with narratives of feminism, or even with themselves. While we might wish to problematize specific statements, overall, this eccentricity has value in its ability provoke us into reflection, to interrogate discourses that risk becoming consolidated into unexamined, received norms, and as a largely unheard strand of feminist self-fashioning and self-theorizing.

### 3. *Interrupted desires*

In this final section, I reflect briefly on a particular form of interruption to sexual desire that Sapienza does not provoke, but *suffers*: the interruption of same-sex desire. While the adults around her seem to encourage her fluid approach to gender identity, Maria Giudice also enforces sexual normativity. When she discovers Goliarda and her half-sister Nica in a naked embrace, she banishes Nica and gives Goliarda two slaps (LA, 97)—a disciplinary gesture establishing the norms of acceptable and unacceptable sexuality, which Goliarda seems to internalise and repeats symbolically in later writing, as discussed below. In the version she recounts as a forty year old woman, Sapienza tells us that these pro-

hibitive slaps deprived her of immediate pleasures with Nica, but perhaps also denied her something else: «Non solo il suo corpo ma la sua fantasia mi rubano quei due schiaffi. E solo il suo corpo e la sua fantasia?» (*LA*, 107). She enlarges, explaining that this disruption of her sexual discovery of herself left her «bloccata», stuck in a phase of homosexual exploration that should have given way to a presumed «normal» heterosexual sexuality (*LA*, 98). Her comments are both transgressive for a text published in 1967, since she declares herself «omosessuale», and rather homophobic, since this is cast as a problematic state of arrested sexual development.

Maria Giudice's interrupting slaps recur several times across Sapienza's work.<sup>23</sup> The most relevant instances for the present discussion are in *Il filo di mezzogiorno*, and *Le certezze del dubbio*. During her analysis with Majore, he homophobically insists that Sapienza must stop seeing her female friends because of the dangerous ambiguity of female friendships, whereupon she is incensed and slaps him twice (*FM*, 70). However, although here Sapienza repeats and resignifies her mother's gesture, potentially reversing the prohibition on homosexuality by accusing the accuser, she and her analyst never fully discuss what these slaps mean, so rather than being able to entirely reclaim the gesture she concludes later in this text that she has been torn from Nica's arms forever (*FM*, 109). The sexual prohibition instilled by her mother's slaps lingers, therefore, in Sapienza's textual, sexual identities.

The second set of slaps occur in *Le certezze del dubbio*, which recounts her continuing friendships with her former Rebibbia cellmates after her brief spell in the prison in 1980. Taking a shower with Barbara and Roberta, who kisses her, the spectre of lesbian desire raises its head once again, making Sapienza feel fear, as though she is being plunged into «l'occhio del ciclone».<sup>24</sup> She asks herself, and the reader how to make sense of this late awakening of homosexual desire, when she was convinced that she had safely stored her «lato omosessuale nel cantuccio sereno dalla sublimazione» (*CD*, 99). Sapienza's conflicted attraction to Roberta soon leads to a repetition of Maria Giudice's punitive slaps. Sapienza is shocked to find herself slapping Roberta, feeling that it was not really her who carried out this action, and that she had actually slapped herself (*CD*, 128). There are various dis-locations at work here but rather than interrupting normative meaning making machines, it is Sapienza who is stopped in

her tracks. She feels separate from her «homosexual» self, that, she tells us, she has partially repressed, but also feels alienated from her own gesture, which is not surprising if we consider that it is Maria Giudice's action which she is repeating. Sapienza expresses frustration at this recurring prohibition of homosexual/queer desire through the internalization of heteronormative socio-cultural discourses, yet unlike the slaps she administers to Majore in defence of her charged female friendship, these slaps are a form of self-administered prohibition, contrived to quell her own queer desire. Given the swagger with which she disrupts norms of sex and gender elsewhere, it is perhaps unexpected that her mother's slaps should retain such power for so many years. This seems to be a moment in which Sapienza's view of herself is profoundly interrupted, more so than by any previous experience of finding herself dis-located from dominant models of identity. What I find particularly striking is the frankness with which she recounts her feelings, perhaps to ensure that her unsettled emotions can assume a consistency through their articulation in text. While she is troubled by what she feels, she acknowledges that despite her apparent commitment to unravelling any glib «truths» of identity, the narrative of herself that she had been creating is itself more of a «bugia» than she had thought.

### *Conclusions*

This article has attempted to highlight the challenging aspects of Sapienza's work, and the ways in which she can be seen to function as a disruptive eccentric voice that calls into question norms of sex, gender and the coherent subject. It has also revealed various instances of and responses to existential «interruption»: relish at discovering her dis-location from presumed identity categories; candid humour while relearning her memories after a traumatic experience in an attempt to shore up a commitment to life; painful honesty in voicing the experience of blocked sexual desire. For Sapienza, eccentricity is both a productive driving force of which she is proud, and a source of difficulty and struggle. It is notable, and perhaps testament to the degree of discomfort caused by her dis-located voice, that Sapienza is only now attracting the attention of feminist scholars and critics in a substantial way. This may be due to some of the rather critical, dismissive views that she expressed. Rather than hypothesize about the

reasons for her lack of success earlier, however, it is surely more productive to consider what her dissonant voice can enlighten for us today.

At this moment of increased critical interest in her work, as she is being acclaimed and defined, I would argue for the importance of retaining a keen sense of the contradictions and dis-locations that mark her thought. I am wary of seeming to impose a «lesbian» identity on Sapienza, which I do not wish to do. However, I would resist Pellegrino's assertion that while Sapienza loved women it was never «eroticamente»: he admits that she engaged in «poche e circoscritte esperienze omosessuali, per spirito conoscitivo» when she was young, but then maintains that she did not feel «passione» for women (*IJG*, 122). It seems to me that we should do what she asks us to: listen to her half-truths and witness her performed identities on their own terms. Taken together, her pleasure in assuming and narrating a queer, gender-ambiguous identity, her contradictory investments in the category of «woman», her bold disregard of traditional attitudes to sexuality, and her struggle with her own queer desires, create «the occasion for the critical reworking of apparently constitutive gender norms» (BUTLER 1993, x). They also disrupt any critical «meaning making apparatus» that might start to solidify around her work. We see Sapienza rewriting herself, literally, through her texts, and we see her raw struggle with the experience of being «eccentric»--dis-located from normative society, from feminist groups, and also from herself. If, as Adorno once wrote, «the value of thought is measured by its distance from the continuity of the familiar»,<sup>25</sup> then one significant contribution made by Sapienza is to highlight the value, challenges and necessity of retaining a discontinuity from any apparent familiarity in ourselves, as well as in socio-cultural discourses and institutions.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> *Lettera aperta* (henceforth *LA*) was shortlisted for the Premio Strega and Natalia Ginzburg hoped that the novel would make it through to the final round—but it was not selected. See SCARPA, 2009, 523-24.

<sup>2</sup> It was published by Stampa Alternativa. For an account of her attempts to publish the novel see SCARPA 2009, 515-38.

<sup>3</sup> From now on, references to these texts are abbreviated as follows: *Il filo di mezzogiorno* (*FM*); *L'università di Rebibbia* (*UR*); *Le certezze del dubbio* (*CD*); *L'arte della gioia* (*AG*); *Io, Jean Gabin* (*IJG*); *Destino coatto* (*DC*).

<sup>4</sup> Pellegrino is preparing an edition of Sapienza's diaries: personal communication, March 2011.

<sup>5</sup> See for example: <http://22passi.blogspot.com/2008/09/la-biografia-di-goliarda-sapienza-di-g.html>; <http://www.facebook.com/pages/Goliarda-Sapienza/33623140698?ref=ts&sk=wall>.

<sup>6</sup> Claude IMBERTY argues that *L'arte della gioia* can be read as the autobiography of the protagonist, Modesta (2008, 52). Domenico SCARPA, conversely, identifies the «interferenza tra la finzione romanesca e la cronaca reale dei fatti di famiglia» (2009, 519).

<sup>7</sup> Monica FARNETTI (2011, 92) defines Modesta's acts as motivated by «'misoginia' amorosa».

<sup>8</sup> I explore Sapienza's queer fictions about gender and sexuality in ROSS 2012.

<sup>9</sup> See PROVIDENTI 2010 for details of her biography.

<sup>10</sup> Ida Petriccione di Vadi; see PROVIDENTI 2010, 194.

<sup>11</sup> For example, *CD* and *IJB* are largely told in the first person but switch to the third person narrator occasionally (see *CD*, 113; *IJB*, 9). *AG* moves between Modesta's first person narratorial voice and a third person narrator.

<sup>12</sup> *LA*, 16. In addition to the published text, referred to as *LA*, I also refer to the unpublished manuscript of this novel (referred to as *SAPIENZA unpublished*), which contains material excluded from the published text. I am grateful to Angelo Maria Pellegrino and to Giovanna Providenti for making this available to me.

<sup>13</sup> *SAPIENZA unpublished*, 46. In the published text she tells readers in the opening paragraph that she is aged 40 at the time of writing.

<sup>14</sup> FOUCAULT 1988, 154. See also BUTLER 1999, 117.

<sup>15</sup> See *IJB*, 54 and PROVIDENTI 2010, 197.

<sup>16</sup> «Goliardo, oh scusa! Ecco che ti chiamo Goliardo! scusa ma sei il suo ritratto a volte» (*IJB*, 154).

<sup>17</sup> *IJB*, 11. I do not have space to explore in detail here the charged relationship between Sapienza and her mother, which merits a sustained psychoanalytically-informed analysis of Maria Giudice as primary love object.

<sup>18</sup> Sapienza became involved with Citto Maselli in 1947; their relationship lasted until 1965.

<sup>19</sup> *SAPIENZA unpublished*, .46. The manuscript to which she refers may be *Carluzzu*, which is incomplete and unpublished. See PROVIDENTI 2010, 201.

<sup>20</sup> Letter dated 19 October 1979, cited in SCARPA 2009, 529-30.

<sup>21</sup> For an account of second-wave feminism in Italy see BONO AND KEMP 1991.

<sup>22</sup> FARNETTI 2011, 92. She is drawing on the work of Luisa Muraro.

<sup>23</sup> See, for example when Suor Costanza slaps Modesta awake (*AG*, 47), and when Modesta slaps Beatrice (*AG*, 116, 139). ORTU mentions the recurrence of the two slaps (2011, 148-79, 161-62).

<sup>24</sup> *CD*, 99. There is a brief discussion of this episode in BARBARULLI 2011, 132-47, 145-46.

<sup>25</sup> From *Minima moralia*, cited in BUTLER 2005, 3.